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**Michael Ondaatje's *Divisadero*
as rhizomic novel**

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The aim of this work¹ is to show how and why Deleuze and Guattari's paradigm of the rhizome perfectly describes the structure of Michael Ondaatje's novel *Divisadero* (2007) and offers a perspective through which it can be seen as an example of a cosmopolitan novel,² one that activates a dialogue between the local and the global. One way to define Ondaatje's novel is to test its capacity to be structurally, as well as thematically, rhizomic, that is, its ability to interconnect various non contiguous geo-political realities. In their philosophical work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1992), Deleuze and Guattari proposed a new morphology, the rhizome, in opposition to the arborescent Western model of the tree with its branches, which is based on a binary

system of subsequent subdivisions by two, then four, and so on, and which assumes a relationship of origin and development from an original. I suggest that the rhizome is the best morphological model to describe not only postcolonial writings, but also Ondaatje's novel:

A first type of book is the root-book. The tree is already the image of the world, or the root the image of the world-tree. This is the classical book, as noble, signifying, and subjective organic interiority (the strata of the book). [...] The world has become chaos, but the book remains the image of the world: radicle-chaosmos rather than root-cosmos. [...] a book all the more total for being fragmented. [...] A rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicles. Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes. Plants with roots or radicles may be rhizomorphic in other respects altogether: the question is whether plant life in its specificity is not entirely rhizomatic. Even animals are, in their pack form. Rats are rhizomes. Burrows are too, in all of their functions of shelter, supply, movement, evasion, and breakout. The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1992: 6)

By opposing the rhizome, with its ramified and green superficial sprouting and its connected interred tubers and bulbs and radicle system, to the tree, with its monolithic status, Deleuze and Guattari propose a model that explains erratic, unpredictable movements and lines of flight, capable of overcoming barriers and borderlines and substantially free from constraints. *Divisadero* seems to adopt exactly this new morphology both structurally and thematically, thus becoming a cosmopolitan novel.

The rhizome is the perfect transnational metaphor, thanks to its horizontal (rather than vertical) erratic and nomadic development; to its capacity to cross borders (rather than being rooted in one place); to its systems of radicles which surface and disappear here and there; to its adaptability to different climates and versatility and hybridity of forms (it is root, plant and fruit). *Divisadero* is rich in rhizomic subjects (rooted in more than one place, name, nation), rhizomic maps (erratic and full of digressions), rhizomic wars (spatially and temporally connecting diverse geopolitical regions) as well as in other rhizomic systems, making it a transnational novel, in which migration, nomadism, and hybridity create a net of globally connected geographical areas of the world.

Cosmopolitan authors seem to be united by their uprootedness; they frequently are migrants, international intellectuals, displaced persons, or *déraciné* subjects: born in one country, often raised in a second country, and writing about a third one. Although those terms are not all synonymous, they apply to Ondaatje: he was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka, educated in London, and then emigrated to Toronto, Canada: he perfectly exemplifies this status. By his own admission, Ondaatje belongs to a generation of writers that "was the first of the real migrant tradition [...] of writers of our time – Rushdie, Ishiguro, Ben Okri, Rohinton Mistry – writers leaving and not going back, but taking their countries with them to a new place" (Bush, 1990: 89). Moreover, since issues such as belonging, homelessness, and migrancy are central in Ondaatje's works, his writing interacts with the writing of other so-called global writers.³ Ondaatje, like most postcolonial intellectuals, writes from a standpoint that is both de-centred and re-territorialized⁴ – according to the Deleuzian paradigm – and always re-negotiated, as Sri Lankan-Canadian:

Ondaatje's ambiguous positioning has often posed a problem for critics who, on the one hand, want to claim him as a Canadian writer but, on the other hand, find it difficult to locate him as such because his texts don't deal explicitly with 'Canadian' material. (Saul, 2006: 44)

Cosmopolitan writers and novels cross settings or geographical locations and transcend national boundaries, defying the notion of a national literature, precisely because they cross linguistic, cultural and geo-political borders.

These movements provide evidence of the relevance of the rhizome as a paradigm that connects postcolonial and global literature. If, on the one hand, Deleuze has been accused of Eurocentrism and even of appropriating indigenous experiences, particularly with the notion of nomadology, on the other hand he has influenced many intellectuals, who are active in the field of postcolonial studies, from Young, to Glissant and Appadurai, as Bignall and Patton illustrate in *Deleuze and the Postcolonial* (2010). The potential of the notions of the rhizome and nomadology, however, is best illustrated in cosmopolitan writings, as will be shown in the case of *Divisadero*.

Michael Ondaatje seems to embody the cosmopolitan writer who avoids definition in terms of national productions. In particular, he has proven to be a master of the rhizomic structure in his previous works, namely *The English Patient* (1992) and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970). Both the novel and the long poem deploy nomadism by portraying characters always on the move within multiple interconnected geographies; they use palimpsests which work rhizomically, as in the case of passages from Herodotus embedded in the narrative of the patient or as in the case of scraps of newspaper articles and other spurious material used to portray Billy; these texts mix and transcend genres structurally, becoming nomadic. All these strategies can be analysed alternatively as postmodern or as rhizomic constructs. Similarly, in *Anil's Ghost*, which explores diverse geographies, Ondaatje has committed himself to the defence of human rights and has brought to global aesthetic recognition the local art of salvaging the Buddha statues, as heritage of humanity as well as effigies of the values of humanism.

Within this framework, *Divisadero* is no exception, and at this stage, it is worth giving an account of its complex plot. The novel is divided into two parts, one mirroring the other, with two groups of almost specular characters. In the first half of the novel the incestuous love affair between Anna and Coop, her adopted brother, disrupts the family. Anna flees to France, while Coop becomes a gambler in the local casinos. Claire, another adopted daughter in this motherless family, remains close to her aging, silent and brooding step-father. This chapter on life in California closes with Coop becoming unconscious after a fight and joining his similarly doomed father under Claire's protective wing. In the second half of the novel, we find Anna in southern France. She has changed her name and has started a new life. She meets Rafael, a Gypsy, who tells her the story of his nomadic mother and father. The latter is an Italian who has begun roaming around the French countryside, after taking part in the Second World War. Rafael also provides Anna – now an academic in French literature – with all the pieces of information she needs to complete the biography of the writer Lucien Segura, who had befriended the gypsy family. Segura had travelled with them on a horse-drawn cart, having left his family and properties behind, in search of a place to retire to live. He had reached Dému, his final destination, and his house has become Anna's abode in the present.

As briefly outlined here, it is possible to anticipate how the rhizome becomes central to *Divisadero* and how this notion can help in defining it as a cosmopolitan novel. In terms of setting, *Divisadero* presents polycentric and non-hierarchical geographies. It is not about Canada, and it is a postcolonial novel only in so far as it tangentially explores American neo-colonialism. *Divisadero* thus implies a criticism of the concept of a new global and “totalitarian” Empire that transcends nation-states and controls and over-determines economic and political international affairs, as has been discussed by Negri and Hardt (2000). *Divisadero*, with its multiple and interconnected settings and geographies, deploys multiple scenarios without necessarily being a postcolonial novel, even in the sense mentioned above. California and Southern France are its centripetal centres; these are regions that soon enough end up including the surrounding territories and whose permeable borders are criss-crossed several times.

Not only does the setting change from the first half of the novel to its second half, but indeed almost all the characters are nomads, always on the run, displaced and reterritorialized elsewhere. Rhizomic subjectivities and the strategies of characterization applying to them are the first step in the construction of this cosmopolitan narrative. As the emblem of rhizomic subjects, Anna, the main protagonist, disappears from America, and reappears – in a Deleuzian erratic and unpredictable movement – as a different person and with a new identity in Europe, having translated herself into the French language. In order to do so, she had first to cross California, her homeland, at sixteen, accepting a lift from a black man driving a van and turning her back on her father and her beloved Coop:

this person formerly known as Anna climbed into the passenger seat of a vehicle going south. We drove all night, a shy black man [...] giving a lift to someone he thought was a French girl. [...] he, luckily, was going inland first, Merced, *Mercy*, and then south on 99. It was a route separate from my father's. We continued to Dinuba, [...] then Cutler and Visalia, [...] and finally entered the deserted town of Allensworth. [...] At Bakersfield he dropped me off, and slipped some money into my pocket. (Ondaatje, 2007)⁵

The next time we find her, she is in France, also driving southwards:

I had flown into Orly, my friend Branka had met my plane, and we drove through the darkening outskirts, passing the smaller peripheral towns that were like blinks of light as we travelled south. [...] We reached Toulouse around midnight. [...] Branka proposed a diversion to the village of Barran, [...] and forty minutes later we navigated the car through the narrow streets of that town. [...] We returned to the car and drove towards Dému. (135-6)

Technically a migrant from the US to France, Anna has a nomadic spirit and is not the only nomad in the family. Claire, too, her step- and quasi-twin sister, likes wandering around on horseback: “Claire was in many ways the adventurous one, with a wildness in her. Her journals about her travels – on horseback, of course – contained a range of friends unknown to the rest of us” (137). Coop, Anna's elder step-brother and lover, is no different. As a young boy he used to disappear now and then to roam about little towns in search of jobs or casinos where he could play cards. Finally, he chooses a nomadic life: he lives in hotels as an anonymous card player among “the grandness of the names of the

towns – Vegas, Grass Valley, Nevada City, Tahoe – [...] something discovered on an adult's map" (158).

Later on, Ondaatje also introduces a family of Gypsies, who live in a caravan and frequently change their place of abode. Towards the end of his life, the old writer Lucien Segura joins them, travelling inland in order to look for a house where he can retire. These are all examples of rhizomic existences, subjectivities on the move, led by chance, and without a precise goal in front of them. Chance and hazard are important in the novel, where gambling and card games create a parallel structural metaphor to the narrative discourse (even lexically, one of the most frequently used verbs is 'to draw', as in a game of cards) as if to confirm that randomness of movement is more important than the final result or goal. This "lack of abode", this idea of permanent displacement and homelessness or "dis-habitation", may be seen as unsettling by some, but it can also be emancipatory for others (Calabrese, 2005: 205). This is exactly what provides the rhizomic features of this type of subjectivities. Ondaatje's characters translate and adapt themselves into new spaces and languages,⁶ and define themselves as extraterritorial subjectivities. A similar approach to interrogations of national boundaries, cosmopolitanism and migrant writings is an attribute of Salman Rushdie's fictional and scholarly production; for instance, even in a long essay such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1992), Rushdie stresses that one's abode is everywhere, or can be elsewhere, but is also in the place where we started, and this ideal defines both himself and his fictional characters.

As Joanne Saul pointed out, "exile from family, father, culture" creates "the dominant figure in the carpet" in Ondaatje's writings (2006: 37). Moreover, his novels are crowded with an array of archivists, historians, detectives, reporters, and biographers (Verhoeven, 1992: 181-2). Anna is an archivist and historian, as the omniscient narrator shows: "she herself works in archives and discovers every past but her own, again and again, because it will always be there." (76); later on, she claims: "I am a person who discovers archival subtexts in history and art" (137). Self-exiled from her father's house, she is a homeless migrant, who finally argues: "Those who have an orphan's sense of history love history. And my voice has become that of an orphan. Perhaps it was the unknown life of my mother, her barely drawn portrait, that made me an archivist, a historian" (141).

Anna is in fact both writing her autobiography as well as the biography of the mysterious French writer Lucien Segura. The resulting text is a rhizomic mixture of life-writing and of fictional biography: an (author)biography. This type of writing is not new in Ondaatje's works, for he has produced his own autobiography in *Running in the Family* (1982) as well as fictional biographies of The Kid, in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, of the jazz cornet player Buddy Bolden, in *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), and, to a lesser extent, of Count Almásy, in *The English Patient*. Most recently, *The Cat's Table* (2011) provides Ondaatje's memoir of his journey from Colombo to Britain as a boy, in a mixture of facts and fiction. In *Divisadero*, the possibilities of autobiographical writing are further explored. If *Running in the Family* as autobiography, or "biotext", is an attempt at "writing himself into a place", at "writing himself into a 'Ceylon' that exists in the past tense" (Saul, 2006: 54), in *Divisadero*, Anna's autobiography is disconnected from her birthplace, because she starts writing when in France, after she has renounced her identity and her name, after she has sprung up in a new existence. Besides, only a

very short portion of her narrative is in the first person, because, she says: “In my story the person I always begin with is Claire” (137).

Another way to emancipate the Self from a lineage, or to provide the Self with a rhizomic status, is to change name. In *Divisadero* almost all the characters have volatile names. Anna changes nationality, language and name, thus allowing Ondaatje to stress more than once her fluid or liquid identity: “With her becoming a creature of a hundred natures and voices, and with a new name” (90); “In my work I sometimes borrow Claire’s nature, as well as her careful focus on the world. For I have changed my name” (138); “I disappeared”. “I was now a runaway” (140); “This person formerly known as Anna” (144); “She knows there is a ‘flock’ of Annas, and that the Anna beside this unnamed river of Rafael’s is not the Anna giving a seminar at Berkeley” (88).

Besides, Coop is known as “The Untouchable” at card tables; only very good friends know his real name. Aria, the gypsy woman, has secret names: “She’s Romani, they have so many names. The secret name [...] and the second name, which is a Roma name [...]. And that one is Aria” (175). The husband himself, an anonymous Italian, refuses proper names, too: “No, I don’t have a name, a permanent name, the husband said, when asked again. [...] I cannot call you a thief all the time, I need a name. [...] Liébard it is. [...] So the name Liébard was used for a while, the first of many aliases” (177); “Liébard announced that he was relinquishing the name he’d been using, and was now taking the name Astolphe. Lucien realized the man used names like passwords, all of them with a brief life span” (182).

A final way to dissolve identities, or make them rhizomic, is through the proliferation of twins or quasi-twins. Anna is once mistaken for Claire by Coop, and, later, Claire for Anna; Coop chooses his second lover because she reminds him of Anna; Rafael, Anna’s second lover, shares many features with Coop; Lucien Segura is almost a mirror image of the Italian thief; later on Segura is mistaken by Marie-Neige, a woman he is very fond of, for Roman, her husband; the Italian thief’s theory is that “if he ever needed a passport he would use someone else’s... Someone roughly the same age and hair colour. No one looks like their passport picture” (90). The presence of twins and doubles favours the reproduction of events and situations which thus tend to reappear with slight variations in different geographical or temporal settings. In *Divisadero*, the second part of the novel mirrors the first one, and characters are doubles; thus, the novel seems to resist singularity – *the hero, the story, the cause, the time*, – and more freely to expand into transnational double plots.

In particular, the rhizomic/nomadic existence of all the characters is favoured by the fact that most of them are orphans (Anna, Coop, Claire, Lucien Segura). This abundance of orphans and twins matches postcolonial narratives and cosmopolitan novels. Such narratives employ a doubling of situations which they inherit from postmodern formal patterns. Most importantly, orphans and twins differ from the arborescent concept of the family tree, and thereby the traditional Western ideal of a genealogy as deeply rooted in a single house/nation. “The rhizome is an anti-genealogy” (1992: 9), Deleuze and Guattari claim. In *Divisadero*, the almost omnipotent patriarchal father figure, metaphorically speaking, represents a trunk that soon enough loses his only real and natural branch (Anna), as well as the grafted branch (Coop).

Apart from characters, geographies in the text are also represented through rhizomic icons, that is strange maps which do not correspond to reality and become either personal and idiosyncratic or allegorical. Rhizomic maps, too, are serialised in the narrative. Maps are used repeatedly, and this is another typical example of rhizomic narration, through maps that un-map the territory, that deterritorialize space, resisting official cartography, and its ordering, measuring and faithful representation of the territory within precise borderlines⁷. Maps are not only an iconic and topographic translation of the territory, of the local; here, they also become more personal, idiosyncratic, creative, ever-changing, and therefore, not easily reproducible or memorizable.

Anna, once in France, needs new maps for her errands. The first map she uses is drawn, quite arbitrarily, for her own uses and purposes, by her gardener and local postman (one who “travelled all the time, it was in his blood”):

She had asked him in her New World French where the good places to walk were, and he had drawn a map with the best paths, routes that weaved through other properties and crossed the river. [...] he drew the rectangle of the house and a quick oval for the herb bed, then re-created the world outside, ending with distant copses and deer forests, dismissing places she should avoid, those that tourists inhabited. In Anna’s terms the map was a “keeper,” and she might one day frame it and hang it in her living room on Divisadero Street in San Francisco. (65)

In this passage it is interesting to notice that tourists’ settlements are avoided and that Anna knows at heart that she could always “escape back there”; Dému is thus connoted as a rural niche, a place where she can hide away. Further, when she meets Rafael, during one of her first walks, and he offers to accompany her back to the manor house, he follows his own mental map of the place, a more “animal” one:

He took no direct path towards the house. He guided her, stepping over bushes. They had to bend almost double to walk under the low branches of the trees. He ignored a clear path a few yards to their right, as if he had the mind of a cow, or a crow in mid-air, perceiving a more natural route. If anything, going this way, they took longer to reach the house. The comfort she had felt in that field was replaced by scratches, and some annoyance towards him. (70)

Rafael can be seen to embody the Native, the indigenous and real nomad, who knows the land intimately and is part of it to the point of metaphorically becoming nature (animal).

There is another map of France that Anna is fond of, which has a gender bias and is even more idiosyncratic. It is *La Carte du Tendre Pays*, both a topographic and an allegorical map of the 17th Century, by Madeleine de Scudéry, which shows the routes of amorous life according to the chivalric codes of the time:

One of the dearest possessions that Anna has is an old map – la carte du Tendre Pays – sweetly named, of emotions that fit into the shape of France. It was composed by women in an earlier century, during an era of male exploration and mapmaking. But this was a map of yearnings that courteously avoided sexual love, except for a darkly etched thicketed region in the north, listed as “Terres Inconnues”. (89)

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, Claire rescues Coop in Tahoe, where he has been beaten to unconsciousness by a gang of gamblers. Claire, in spite of the suggestion she gets from her boss: “just drive. Wherever you feel like, don’t make it logical”, needs a “local map” to choose good places to hide away: “She remembered Ve’a’s remark about randomness and made Coop double back, and they entered California and went north through the old gold towns. She bought a local map and discovered a place called Hass, nestled in the hills” (155).

Just like Claire and Coop, who go up and down the same roads at least twice, to create an illogical pattern and to avoid pointing to a precise final goal in the journey, Rafael and his mother arrange to go and retrieve their caravan in the south in order to bring it back to Dému, where they had decided to establish their residence, not far from where they had arrived with Lucien Segura. Thus, they duplicate their journey back and forth:

Their journey on horseback took several days, and they crossed the fan of rivers – the Ardour, the Baïse, the Gimone. They went south and east, riding into the fertile lands. On the fourth evening they arrived in darkness at the outskirts of Saint-Martory, where they had left their horses and caravan. [...] Soon they were heading north, returning by a different route because with the swaying caravan they needed wider roads. There could be no more shortcuts by simply opening gates and crossing fields, or even fording a stream where the water was deep; there was too much weight for the horses to pull from the sandy soil. They were going towards Plaisance, and from there they would leave the company of the Arros River and turn west. (183)

This further example shows how unconventional and erratic this journeying is. It is much more a celebration of the journey than of the destination. Similarly, in his youth, Lucien Segura also travelled on horseback from the war front back home, through a series of complicated detours:

He looked at a map and realized that with a horse he could return to Marseillan and see whether the house was safe; later he could take the train and meet his family in Paris. [...] At Montargis, he traded the horse as he had planned. With luck it would be only three more days, and he would reach Marseillan late on the third or fourth evening. [...] This must have been the fourth or fifth day of Lucien’s travels, and he was skirting the forests whenever he could because he feared encountering strangers. [...] It had been dark for many hours when Lucien reached Marseillan. (254-6)

As these examples show, most characters in *Divisadero* are travellers, migrants, or nomads who adapt themselves quite easily anywhere: they often move to new houses, hotels, and towns. Their journeys are never straightforward movements from one destination to the next; rather, they are erratic and personal paths, detours, often enough into the wilderness. These characters are uprooted, at home in the world at large, easily renouncing their nationalities (Anna, Rafael, Aria, Liébard), their names (Anna, Coop, Aria, Liébard, Segura), their homes (Anna, Coop, Rafael, Aria, Liébard, Segura).

Thus, all these nomadic subjects seem ready to renounce the political and social reality of the nation-state, a socio-political entity that has been pivotal in modern Europe, at least up to the First and Second World Wars. This is precisely the way in which these subjects respond to a violent history. The idealization of the nationless, rhizomic subject attributes to these nomadic characters a historical agency, a capacity to produce new

forms of community, even though these may be clandestine and restricted to two or three people. In this respect, Anna's retreat in Dému, with Rafael and the ghost of Segura, is similar to Hana's retreat in the Villa San Girolamo with the English Patient, Caravaggio and Kip in *The English Patient*.

Furthermore, it is interesting to notice how the United States is represented through the image of the desert. During her flight Anna is helped by a truck driver and they stop in a deserted city. Similarly, Coop finds refuge with his friends Axel (The Gentile) and his fiancé, Lina, who live in the vacant Jericho Army Base, with their home in an abandoned aircraft. This dismantling of military areas, together with the displacement of the American military forces to a transnational war scenario in another desert (the Iraq desert: I shall come back to this more recent war shortly), provides a bleak representation of America as a place where history has exhausted itself more than once. This is shown not only by the abandoned mining towns of the gold rush, but also by the more recently abandoned military bases.

These reflections on maps and deserts lead us to consider the representation of rhizomic wars in the novel. Indeed, what also provides a transnational perspective to the novel is the way in which non contiguous geopolitical realities are connected. References to various wars provide this poly-synchronous time-span of the narrative. Thus, while maps rearrange/rewrite more or less familiar territories, wars rhizomically break out here and there, now and then, in different parts/eras of the world, like tubers sprouting up from the same erratic deadly roots of financial and arm flows.

Lucien Segura took part in the First World War as a volunteer with the French medical staff. After experiencing diphtheria among the troops, he wrote a pamphlet denouncing the sanitary conditions of soldiers along the border between France and Belgium, where he witnessed not only death, but also starvation and fear among the troops. He noticed that whole villages were full of widows and there was a high rate of "suicides" (254). In later years, Segura's travel mate, Liébard, the Italian thief and husband to the gypsy woman, declares his opposition to war, for he had taken part and had been injured in the Second World War: "I went to the war and I never came back", the thief said. This confession "had come in response to the writer's speaking of what he had witnessed in an earlier war" (176). Anger and protest on the part of the writer Segura, and the feelings of desertion on the part of Liébard are not the only consequences of the war that readers witness in the novel. Veá, the lawyer with whom Claire works, suffers from post-traumatic shock because of the Vietnam War, and his occasional but compulsive drinking is one of the consequences of that war. He still feels as if he were there, fighting on the frontline:

Veá had been in Vietnam between the ages of seventeen and nineteen, and he had seen the monster. He knew how the monster could come upon you. [...] He talked Vietnam. He talked out the cases he was struggling over, but he was really talking Vietnam. 'And we're the ones who lost the war...'. (104-5)

However, the wars that loom largest in the novel are the more recent global wars. *Divisadero* can be seen to be part of a dialogue between a number of recent texts that also take into consideration the Canadian reception of the Gulf Wars. The Gulf Wars intrude into the narratives through the radio and the screens inside the casinos. This new form of

televised war that produces estrangement is also present in Dafne Marlatt's *Taken* (1996), in which the narrator, Suzanne, watches the so-called "surgical attacks" and feels so disturbingly close to those sites of violence and, at the same time, terribly far away and totally anesthetized. The novel similarly moves back to Suzanne's mother coming to terms with the Second World War in the Pacific. Another novel that tries to connect various geographies and historical causes and effects is Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009), where the bombing of Nagasaki is connected with the Partition, after which Pakistan is left to its own destiny, until the so-called "War on Terror" further complicates the relationships between the United States, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Finally, Shamsie's novel ends on the border between the US and Canada.

The first reference to the First Gulf War in *Divisadero* occurs in a paragraph spaced as if it were a newspaper article, or a cold and self-referential report. These facts are simply reported while Coop is engaged in a game of cards. It is Autry, one of the adversaries, who discusses the topic while dealing cards. He compares "this desert" and "that troublesome desert", both controlled by a similar technology: "strictly overseen by the eye in the sky" (54). Then, it is the turn of one of Coop's friends, Dorn-the-hippy, to raise the issue once again, this time provoking a nervous reaction in one of the players at the card table, who wants to stop him (56). Discussing the war is reduced, here, to a way of trying to distract the others from the game, yet, the very mentioning of the events encourages readers to take notice of these latest forms of imperialistic violence.

The next time War is mentioned, it is by a five year old boy, who during a party breaks the news of attacks. Coop sends the messenger to Dorn and his wife Ruth, an unconventional couple who can be seen to embody hippy culture. They are very alarmed and concerned, and Ruth erupts with exclamations such as "We are the barbarians, too. We keep letting this happen" (162). She grips the neck of her husband and his necklace breaks: "a hundred small shells paused on his chest for a second then clattered to the floor" (162). This highly symbolic moment shows how even the dream and the historical momentum of hippy culture is by this point dead in America.

Parenthetically, it must be said that strikingly enough the novel does not celebrate technology. In spite of the fact that technology is present inside the casinos in the form of TV-screens and cameras ("the eye in the sky"), and that it is strikingly present in passages about the Iraqi Wars, it is almost absent in the rest of the narrative. The novel opens with Coop diving inside the water tank to repair a spillage with wooden nails and a hammer. Later, news of the Wars are broadcast on the radio rather than on TV. Moreover, the empty and abandoned airplane, where The Gentile and Lina live, literally applying the motto "make love not war", stands like a cathedral in the desert, a piece of post-industrial archaeology. Finally, Anna, who is an academic, delivering talks at Berkeley, but living in southern France, should be connected to the world through the internet and email. Yet, there is no trace of a computer in the narrative. Her fiancé Rafael has a camera, which works with the old and rather slow and noisy mechanical shutter, rather than with modern, digital technology. Landline telephone calls are the main communication system, yet a mobile is named once, while horses are more frequently mentioned than cars. A gramophone, recordings, a sound system, a CD-player are present and the auditory is given more prominence than the visual. However, Coop's forgetfulness and total erasure of memory is compared to a computer black out: "One organ, the

hippocampus, closes down, and we are redirected into an emptiness” (153). These hints at technology, this preference for a softer technology, so to speak, are certainly a way to imply resistance to globalization.

Nevertheless, other rhizomic systems are at work in the novel. These rhizomic structures directly evoke Deleuze and Guattari’s combination of animal and vegetal life-systems:

The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid’s reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. (8)

The tree articulates and hierarchizes tracings; tracings are like leaves of a tree. The rhizome is altogether different, a map and not a tracing. Make a map, not a tracing. The orchid does not reproduce the tracing of a wasp; it forms a map with the wasp, in a rhizome. (10)

In other words,

the orchid becomes deterritorialized by forming an image or a copy of the wasp; but the wasp in turn reterritorialises itself on this image while simultaneously reterritorializing itself by becoming a pawn in the reproduction apparatus of the orchid, that is, in a new organization. (Bignall, Patton, 161 n.29).

This new organization of orchid plus wasp is echoed by Ondaatje in *Divisadero*, through a simile. One of the characters, Liébard, the nomad *par excellence*, “who was as much of a traveller in some ways as a blown seed or a bee” (180), knows the vegetal world in depth, to the point of displaying his pragmatic philosophy of sustainability and of natural bacterial control of crops and parasites:

It would truly have been easier to burn the grass. But Liébard, who was helping Lucien in his campaign to reclaim the overgrown field, had insisted that the meadow needed the ant and the cricket whose lives would be destroyed by such a fire. [...] They raked open the soil and began crop-seeding it so that bacteria in the mustard and clover would eventually draw in nitrogen. [...]

Liébard knew what comforted winged creatures in terms of domicile. He proposed not just birdhouses, but holes drilled into blocks of wood for flying insects. He collected sunflowers and split their stalks and tied them against branches to create a home for bugs. He crammed hay into jars for centipedes to use, for they would eventually eat the larvae of bugs that attacked fruit trees. He was aware of the awkward moral balance in nature. You gave and you took away. Wasps lay eggs that ate the larvae of butterflies, but then wasps were better for plant life than the beautiful flatterers. (180-1)

Liébard is only practicing organic, sustainable agriculture, avoiding pesticides and chemical pollutants. Yet, he is conscious of an animal-vegetal rhizomic well-integrated system, that seems to be the only possibility of survival in the future of a globalized world, more and more hungry for soil and for land to cultivate for an ever-growing population. Another episode mixes the human world with that of vegetal nature, and it is provided by a photograph of Anna:

The woman's figure is naked from the waist up, moving forward, just about to break free of focus. The tanned body wilful, laughing, because she has woven the roots of two small muddy plants into her blond hair, so it appears as if mullein and rosemary are growing out of plastered earth on her head. There's a wet muck across her smiling mouth, and on her lean shoulders and arms. It is as if her energy and sensuality have been drawn from the air surrounding her. [...] this laughing muddy woman, weeds around the fingers of her hand. (188)

Both Anna and Segura have rhizomically disappeared into the countryside, they become confused with a landscape, until Segura changes his name into that of a river – a symbol of liquid identity – and dies swallowed by the water of a little lake near the big house. Water is the best symbol of fluidity and it creates another image of hybrid/rhizomic systems in the novel:

Rafael and I followed the river that disappears under a chaos of boulders and emerges once more a few hundred yards further in the forest. [...] Eventually we come to a ford where our river meets a road and covers it, or from another perspective, where the road has come upon the river and sunk below its surface, as if from a life lived to a life imagined. We have been following the river, so that now we must look on the road as a stranger. (168)

Animal/plant, woman/foilage, and road/stream are once again non-contiguous elements that become intertwined in the novel; while animals, humans and roads have the power to alter dramatically the natural landscape, they are represented here as integrated and compatible systems. Thus, the rhizome, apart from its nomadic and erratic development, also shows its second major attribute: hybridity.

Hybridity is another key feature of both postcolonial and cosmopolitan novels, and it is also a constitutive and morphological feature of rhizomic structures. In *Divisadero* hybridity is principally obtained through a mixing of genres: travel literature, Las Vegas casino life, picaresque narratives, forbidden romance are all part of the canvas. But what is more relevant here is the play between the first-person autobiographical mode and the third-person biographical one. In the first pages of the novel, there is a definition of the shift towards a hybridity of genres: “*Everything is biographical*. [...] Everything is collage, even genetics” (16). In the specific context of *Divisadero*, the feminine gender of the biotext is soon substituted by the masculine subject of the historical/fictional biography. At a certain point in the story Anna seems to affiliate herself to the women writers of the past. First, with her mother, Lidia Mendez, who had been interviewed and whose report was printed in a volume called *Interviews with Californios: Women from Early Times to the Present*. Lidia was probably of Mexican origins, a product of the Mexican War (1846-1848). She died in childbirth, so Anna only knows her through that written testimony. Later on, Anna admits being able to speak “[her] mother’s Spanish, or [her] tentative French”; or “[her] New World French” (147). Later on, she probably studied at Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, and at Berkeley. Yet, above all, she mostly appreciates Colette, the French feminist writer and actress (*Divisadero*, prologue; 77; 141; 142).⁸

Like Colette, Anna does not speak much about her mother. Yet, strangely enough, she attributes Colette’s works to Lucien Segura. In his career Segura seems to have written about:

the *grisette* Claudile and wrote three books about her divergent life. The fictional girl had kept him company. If this was sickness or a perversion of life, it was a sickness that had helped him overcome that difficult time [...] He would remain faithful to this person in the town of Auch whose fate he'd invented and shared with readers. Some had come to love her, and wrote him letters as though he knew her in real life, not just in a fiction. (173)

About Colette's four famous volumes dedicated to (the near-homophone) *Claudine*, Julia Kristeva writes: "in the guise of an easy commercial success, these texts do not simply forge a new literary 'type,' that of the mischievous and rather daring young girl, who would bequeath her 'Claudine collar' to several generations thanks to Colette's theatrical double, the young actress Polaire" (Kristeva, 2006: 7). Like Colette with her *sosia*, or double, the actress Polaire, Anna has a *sosia* in Claire. Her split personality allows her to identify with the writer Segura who also shares certain features with Colette in a chaos of gender reversals. Like Colette, Segura and later, Anna, live in the south of France. Anna eats garlic (72), while – Kristeva writes – "To give flavour to her dishes Colette livens them up with a great deal of garlic, a condiment prized in the south" (2006: 12). Anna likes Colette's choice of masks, and of signatures (from Colette Willy to simply Colette), and like her, Anna also changes her signature or *nom-de-plume*. Segura, too, changes his signature towards the end of his life and career: he signs his new series of novels dedicated to Marie-Neige and to her husband Roman with the name "La Garonne" (263), which is a toponym and the name of a river that runs from the Pireneés to the Atlantic Ocean. Segura had a Spanish father who soon left his mother; Anna had a Spanish speaking mother who died too early. If Colette only finds her mother in a mature work, *Sido* (1930), it is through the identification with Colette that Anna finds her own mother's voice, at least in literary terms, through the fictional biography of Lucien Segura, whose daughter Lucette lives an irregular life – quite like Colette – to further complicate the scene.

The term "global novel" has been used by several reviewers to refer to novels that are likely to appeal to an international audience and might sell well in the global literary market (Brouillette, 2007), as if, on the part of the cosmopolitan writers, it were sufficient to adopt the right recipe. Calabrese, in turn, has claimed that magical realism, the narrative mode adopted for example by Allende and Rushdie, and occasionally by Ondaatje (*Running in the Family*),⁹ is the "sustainable style" in the era of globalization as a new immunological force against the end of history or the end of the novel (2005: 216). *Divisadero* seems rather to participate in the articulation of the local against the global, by hinting at the creation of self-sufficient, environmentally friendly local micro-communities, as a response to both private (family) and historical violence (state). Anna's life in a remote province of France and Claire's life in provincial America show how women might be able to adapt to forms of resistance more than men, for, after all, at the end of the novel both Coop and the Father are disabled and need care, maybe showing the failure of the patriarchal system.

It is possible then to see how *Divisadero* matches the resurgent "romanticization of the displaced, the wandering, and the diasporized", features that Ian Baucom attributes to the logic of global literary studies (2001: 161). In *Divisadero*, Ondaatje uses that rhetoric of romanticization, attributing a rhizomic status to characters, maps and parallel plots and languages, certainly conscious also of the international appeal of his pacifist and eco-friendly works (Concilio, 2009: 12). However, Ondaatje in this novel provides a

representation of ways out of both globalization – if intended in the restricted sense of massive homogenized consumerism and crowded metropolitan life – and war-producing neo-imperialism, by creating alternative, clandestine, small, self-sufficient localised communities, thus refusing to renounce historical agency and committing himself in a cultural gesture of resistance to consumerism and globalization.

Thus, if the rhizome is such a central iconic structure in *Divisadero*, it shows how a cosmopolitan novel that displays various geographies, nomadic characters and rhizomic, hybrid constructs might become a tool to criticize the worst and threatening aspects of globalization, such as the exportation of wars and the imposition of a consumer-oriented logic. *Divisadero*, like *The English Patient* before it, seems to hint at Europe as the place where it is still possible to find refuge from History, maybe because Europe has demonstrated that life is possible after the apocalypse of world wars and after Auschwitz. The United States, on the contrary, is represented through unusual images of deserts, deserted towns, deserted military bases, and through the erasure of conscience, particularly in its male characters (Coop, Father), as if history had affected life there and had exhausted ideologies to the point of no return. Precisely by being a cosmopolitan novel, *Divisadero* seems to provide an alternative to globalization by portraying Europe as a place where nomadic, rural life is still possible.

Notes

¹ This contribution, in a slightly different version, was presented at the ESSE Conference in Turin, Italy, on 28 August 2010.

² On cosmopolitanism see Calabrese (2005), Benvenuti and Ceserani, *La letteratura nell'età globale* (2012), and Schoene (2010).

³ Here the term “global” is used to echo Pico Iyer’s *The Global Soul* (2000). On “global literary studies” see also Moretti (1994), Said (2001), Milz (2006), Heise (2008).

⁴ I intend deterritorialization and reterritorialization as forces and movements of appropriation and abrogation that cause a short-circuit and a consequent ongoing negotiation between two or more cultures, languages, nations (Bignall, Patton, 2010: 148).

⁵ Michael Ondaatje, *Divisadero* (2007). Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

⁶ Emphasizing the international scope of the novel, various languages are present: English, French (91; 173), Spanish (142; 223) and Sanskrit (152). Moreover, by mentioning the subsequent migratory waves to California – “Mexican, Colombian, Vietnamese, Italian-American” (111); “Tagalog, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Japanese” (145) – Anna adds historical depth and complexity to this ethnic and linguistic multiplicity.

⁷ On maps see Baudrillard (1994).

⁸ See Ondaatje’s acknowledgements: “The remark about Colette’s amorously selected words” on page 142 is by Francoise Gilot in her book *Matisse and Picasso* (Bantam, Doubleday, Dell Publishing Group, 1990); *Belles Saisons*, the writing of Colette assembled by Robert Phelps (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978).

⁹ On “magic realism” in Ondaatje’s work, see: (Saul 2005: 51); (Slemon 1988: 9-24).

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